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## What Changed Jim Wright?

When House Majority Leader Jim Wright hurried out in front of his rampaging Democratic troops to lead them to victory in cutting off U.S. aid to Nicaragua's *contras*, it signaled the winner in the struggle for his and his party's soul. Wright had been a sympathetic participant in long negotiations with CIA Director William Casey and other Reagan administration officials seeking a bipartisan plan to keep the *contras* in operation. His last-minute turn the other way marked no ideological conversion; it reflected the harsh realities of internal House politics.

A conservative Democratic colleague explained what happened: "He saw some slippage in what he wants more than anything else, and that's to be speaker." Liberal Democratic congressmen, who have viewed the bushy-browed, stemwinding Texan as "too southern, too country-boy and too syrupy," commented after his performance that they were reassessing their previous hostility to him. By exchanging a profile in courage for front-runner as potential speaker, Wright took no stand against the Democratic Party's similarity in international affairs to the Republican Party of the 1930s. Increasingly, today's mainstream Democrats advocate trade protection, oppose defense spending and are militantly anti-interventionist from Latin America to Africa.

Yet Wright has never shown the slightest attachment to Marxist insurgents or isolationism. On a visit to Nicaragua in 1982 he recognized it as the Marxist dictatorship it is. When Sen. Chris Dodd delivered his leftish response to President Reagan's April 27 address on

Central America, Wright was appalled and said so. Even before that, Wright, in closed-door House committee sessions, was giving Republicans the impression he was eager for bipartisan compromise. About a month ago he was one of several congressmen sitting in on meetings with Casey, White House Chief of Staff James Baker, Deputy Secretary of State Kenneth Dam and other administration officials. As Secretary of State George Shultz quietly told Wright over breakfast five days after the vote, the administration thought the majority leader was aboard. So did many House members.

After the Fourth of July recess, negotiations tailed off. The administration claims Wright lost interest. Democrats argue it was impossible to pin down the administration. Nevertheless, as late as July 27, the day before the vote on CIA funding, Wright emissaries were passing word that he might well go along with a compromise so long as Rep. Phil Gramm, the Texas Democrat-turned-Republican—was not a cosponsor.

That Wright instead led the charge in the House against the *contras* is widely attributed on both sides of the aisle to his hopes to be speaker. Whether or not liberal Democratic congressmen actually threatened to block his ambitions, Wright needs no weathervane to see which way the wind is blowing. The gale wind blowing through the House on July 28 came from junior House Democrats such as Thomas J. Downey of New York. Downey outdid himself with his description of the *contras* as "10,000 thugs, brigands and thieves." Downey and his brethren filled the debate with denunciations not of communist Cuba and Nicaragua but of the *contras* and El Salvador's democratically constituted government.

Democratic moderates were swept along. The moderates blame the outcome on the administration's refusal to bargain. But in fact the realities of Democratic politics in the House would have precluded Wright from supporting any proposal acceptable to the administration without terminating his ability to retain his party leadership.

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